

# The Spirit of Giving



Through their generosity and support, Leon and Cynthia Heron are sharing their blessings with those close to home and far away.

STORY & PHOTOS BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

**A**t the 4-H livestock shows he attends, Leon Heron usually can pick them out — the young club members who have few family members there applauding and supporting their hard work. The animals those youngsters show are the ones he prefers to buy at top prices.

“I like to see kids like that given an opportunity,” says Heron, an Angus producer near Thompsons Station, Tenn., who, with his wife, Cynthia, give thousands of dollars every year to boost dozens of people, projects and causes, including the Angus Foundation.

Seated at a long table in the show barn of their farm, KMK Acres, Leon and Cynthia talk openly about the financial assistance

they’ve given others in the last few years. And, yet, they are private people who’d rather not be recognized or commended for the good they do. They share their wealth to better others’ lives, not to make a name for themselves as philanthropists.

“They are very unassuming people,” says



James Fisher, director of junior activities for the American Angus Association. “Though the support they give is in a very public manner, they are very modest and sincere. If you could choose friends you know you could count on, they’d be the ones.”

Sometimes public, but more often not, the Herons help when and where they see or sense needs. It could be as seemingly small as giving a heifer calf to a 4-H member or as huge as funding the major renovation of a century-old church.

“Little things can help someone so much,” Cynthia says simply. “It doesn’t have to be a lot.”

Her heartfelt desire to help stems from a

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Above: Leon and Cynthia Heron, Thompsons Station, Tenn., have been generous supporters of the Angus Foundation. Their farm, KMK Acres, is named after this trio of canines. From left are Kasey, Muffie and Krystal.

difficult chapter in Cynthia's life. In 1994 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Six years later, following surgery and chemotherapy, she considers herself a survivor.

"When I had cancer, I prayed that God would let me live long enough to see my grandchildren, and He did," says Cynthia, the grandmother of three, all under the age of 2. "I was so thankful because I felt God had given me a second chance."

It was soon after Cynthia's hard-won battles against the disease within her body that she felt led to share. "I don't know if other people can understand if you haven't been there, but I totally want to do for other people," she told *The Tennessean* in a July 1999 interview. "I feel like if I'm here, it's for a reason, and it can't be a selfish one."



KMK Acres is home to a herd of registered Angus cows.



KMK Acres has supported the Angus Foundation through the purchase of several Foundation Heifer packages, contributing to the ability of the National Junior Angus Association to offer more than \$20,000 in scholarships to junior members each year.

### Close to home

She and Leon are far from selfish. For four consecutive summers, they've bought four to eight steers at the Williamson County 4-H Market Steer Show and Sale, had them slaughtered, and given the meat to homeless shelters and children's homes. Last year, when the couple learned the Tennessee Children's Home in nearby Spring Hill was about to lose its swimming pool because of deterioration, they took action.

"We gave them money to renovate it," Cynthia says. "When we went to the ribbon cutting, each one of the children came up, hugged us and thanked us. It's wonderful to be able to put a smile on someone's face."

While at the ribbon cutting, Leon noticed the lack of shade around the pool. To remedy that problem, Cynthia dropped off a check for outdoor furniture that afternoon.

This year, the Herons pledged a half-million dollars to convert a 1950s dining hall at the local children's home into a modern auditorium. "That is a project that would not happen without them," says Tom Carr, director of development for the campus complex where 60 children live.

"We were stunned and overjoyed at the same time," he continues. "I've worked here for 18 years, and I've seen generous people, but I've never seen people more generous than Leon and Cynthia. It's been a joy to get to know them."

Members of Thompsons Station United Methodist Church also were astonished last year when a \$10,000 check from the Herons arrived in the mail out of the blue. Cynthia had heard through the local grapevine that the small congregation was trying to raise money to reroof their 123-year-old church building. Though not members, she and Leon decided to help. Later, when major structural damages were discovered, the Herons gave even more — enough to fund an entire renovation of the church.

This year, the couple paid to have the church's parsonage improved.

"The Herons have certainly enriched our lives and blessed us tremendously," says church member Martha Irwin. "The renovation is complete now, and we have begun to revitalize as a congregation, which is very important. This all came from the generosity of Leon and Cynthia, and we're so thankful."

### And far away

The Herons also support young people interested in agricultural careers. At Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg, Va., they fund three annual \$3,000 scholarships that are given to deserving juniors and seniors

enrolled in the department of animal and poultry sciences.

"Scholarships are a priority in our department," says Gary Minish, department head. "They're a way of rewarding top-caliber students and are an incentive for all students to do well. We have a nice scholarship base here, but they (the Herons' contributions) are a nice addition to our program."

The Herons also have contributed substantially to the Angus Foundation, a fund that supports Angus juniors, leadership training and research, along with annual scholarships. In 1996 they purchased the Foundation Heifer Package for \$37,000 at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo. Two years later, again at the NWSS, the couple paid \$27,500 for five guaranteed pregnancies donated back by the people who'd bought the Foundation heifer. In 1999 they were high bidders — \$20,000 — on the Foundation heifer. This past year, they partnered with Sugar Hill Farms in Arkansas and bought the heifer package for



Even though they are not members of Thompsons Station United Methodist Church, the Herons helped fund renovations of the 123-year-old building.

an astounding \$65,000, then donated back a flush from the heifer, which generated an additional \$25,000.

The Foundation heifer "wouldn't have sold for that much if the Herons hadn't partnered with someone else," Fisher says. "They've moved up the level of the Foundation and brought it to the forefront for other breeders to notice. Their initial \$37,000 helped us to start giving \$20,000 in scholarships every year. It gave us the financial basis to say, 'Yes, we can do this and in an ongoing fashion.' We also hope to raise that amount as we grow the Foundation."

Because they support and help so many, Cynthia and Leon receive a lot of cards and letters of appreciation from people who have been blessed by their generosity.

"When you get a letter like hers," Leon says, referring to a college student who received a \$3,000 scholarship, "it's pretty moving. Then you know you're doing something that's making a difference in someone's life, whether it's that, a scholarship, or a heifer calf to a kid."

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## Some lucky dogs ...

With tails wagging and tongues lolling, Homer and Rocky, a pair of personable beagles, appear on the deck of their two-story doghouse as the car approaches. Behind them saunters Killer, a tough-looking black mongrel that once ran wild, then Sarge the black Lab, and Hobo the hound. At the sight of Cynthia and Leon Heron, they all eagerly wag their tails in welcome.

For a motley crew of formerly homeless canines, they've got it pretty good these days, thanks to their benefactors, the Herons.

"We just love animals," Cynthia explains. "A few years ago, we started helping a local organization called Happy Tales, an animal-rescue group. We fostered a pregnant dog and put her in an office here at the farm, where she had her puppies. Then we found homes for them all."

"We still foster some for Happy Tales," she continues. "But now we have our own group called Furry Friends Animal Rescue. I didn't want to take food and supplies from the Happy Tales people any more. So we're setting up one ourselves. Our daughter, Chrissy Heron, also helps with the dogs and runs ads in the paper to help find them homes."

Dumping unwanted dogs is a reoccurring problem in the fast-developing Thompsons Station area. People constantly call Cynthia

and Chrissy to ask for help in finding a home for a stray animal. When fostering dogs, the pair boards them at their "Doggy Condo," a former tenant's house located just down the highway from KMK Acres.

"When we bought these 45 acres, I told Leon, 'No cattle! This is strictly for the dogs,'" Cynthia says with a laugh.

The renovated house is divided into four living areas that each have their own fenced yard. Big wire-screened doors separate the doggy rooms, and one even has an upstairs loft. Residents may trot freely inside and out, depending on the weather and individual preference.

Though the Herons' mission is to find new owners for the dogs (except for Killer and Sarge—who are permanent live-ins), not just anyone can drop by the Doggy Condo and adopt one.

"We're very picky," Cynthia explains. "If people don't have a fenced yard, they don't get the dog. We try to find them all good homes."



Their goodwill extending beyond just people, the Herons have provided a home for wayward canines until a suitable permanent home with a fenced yard can be located.